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ABSTRACT

This ERIC Digest suggests methods and language that can be used in handling difficult, but common, situations involving young children. Discussion focuses on: (1) 12 methods of discipline that promote self-worth; (2) the process of creating a positive climate that promotes self-discipline; (3) harmful and negative disciplinary methods; and (4) good approaches to discipline. It is argued that self-discipline is better learned through guidance than through punishment. (RH)

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ERIC Digest

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Positive Discipline

How do young children learn self-control, self-help, ways to get along with others, and family and school procedures? Such learning occurs when parents and teachers of infants, toddlers, or preschoolers are continuously involved in setting limits, encouraging desired behaviors, and making decisions about managing children.

When making these decisions, caregivers often ask themselves these questions: Am I disciplining in a way that hurts or helps this child's self-esteem? Will my discipline help the child develop self-control? This digest suggests methods and language that can be used in handling common situations involving young children.

Methods of Discipline That Promote Self-Worth

1. Show that you recognize and accept the reason the child is doing what, in your judgment, is the wrong thing:

"You want to play with the truck but..."
"You want me to stay with you but..."

This validates the legitimacy of the child's desires and illustrates that you are an understanding person. It also is honest from the outset: The adult is wiser, in charge, not afraid to be the leader, and occasionally has priorities other than those of the child.

2. State the "but":

"You want to play with the truck, *but Jerisa is using it right now.*"
"You want me to stay with you, *but right now I need to (go out, help Jill, serve lunch, etc.).*"

This lets the child know that others have needs, too. It teaches *perspective taking*, and may lead the child to develop the ability to put himself in other people's shoes. It will also gain you the child's respect, for it shows you are fair. And it will make the child feel safe; you are able to keep him safe.

3. Offer a solution:

"Soon you can play with the truck."

One-year-olds can begin to understand "just a minute" and will wait patiently if we always follow through 60 seconds later. Two- and three-year-olds can learn to understand, "I'll tell you when it s your turn," if we always follow through within two or three minutes. This helps children learn how to delay gratification but does not thwart their short-term understanding of time.

4. Often, it's helpful to say something indicating your confidence in the child's ability and willingness to learn:

"When you get older I know you will (whatever it is you expect)."

"Next time you can (restate what is expected in a positive manner)."

This affirms your faith in the child, lets her know that you assume she has the capacity to grow and mature, and transmits your belief in her good intentions.

5. In some situations, after firmly stating what is not to be done, you can demonstrate *how we do it*, or *a better way*:

"We don't hit. Pat my face gently." (Gently stroke).
"Puzzle pieces are not for throwing. Let's put them in their places together." (Offer help).

This sets firm limits, yet helps the child feel that you two are a team, not enemies.

6. Toddlers are not easy to distract, but frequently they can be redirected to something that is similar but OK. Carry or lead the child by the hand, saying,

"That's the gerbil's paper. Here's your paper."
"Peter needs that toy. Here's a toy for you."

This endorses the child's right to choose what she will do, yet begins to teach that others have rights, too.

7. Avoid accusation. Even with babies, communicate in respectful tones and words. This prevents a lowering of the child's self-image and promotes his tendency to cooperate.

8. For every *no*, offer two acceptable choices:

"No! Rosie cannot bite Esther. Rosie can bite the rubber duck or the cracker."
"No, Jackie. That book is for teachers. You can have this book or this book."

This encourages the child's independence and emerging decision-making skills, but sets boundaries. Children

should never be allowed to hurt each other. It's bad for the self-image of the one who hurts and the one who is hurt.

9. If children have enough language, help them express their feelings, including anger, and their wishes. Help them think about alternatives and solutions to problems. Adults should never fear children's anger:

> "You're mad at me because you're so tired. It's hard to feel loving when you need to sleep. When you wake up, I think you'll feel more friendly."
> "You feel angry because I won't let you have candy. I will let you choose a banana or an apple. Which do you want?"

This encourages characteristics we want to see emerge in children, such as awareness of feelings and reasonable assertiveness, and gives children tools for solving problems without unpleasant scenes.

10. Establish firm limits and standards as needed. Until a child is 1 1/2 or almost 2 years old, adults are completely responsible for his safety and comfort, and for creating the conditions that encourage good behavior. After this age, while adults are still responsible for the child's safety, they increasingly, though extremely gradually, begin to transfer responsibility for behaving acceptably to the child. They start expecting the child to become aware of others' feelings. They begin to expect the child to think simple cause/effect thoughts (provided the child is guided quietly through the thinking process). This is teaching the rudiments of self-discipline.

11. To avoid confusion when talking to very young children, give clear, simple directions in a firm, friendly voice. This will ensure that children are not overwhelmed with a blizzard of words and refuse to comply as a result.

12. Remember that the job of a toddler, and to some extent the job of all young children, is to taste, touch, smell, squeeze, tote, poke, pour, sort, explore, and test. At times toddlers are greedy, at times grandiose. They do not share well; they need time to experience ownership before they are expected to share. They need to assert themselves ("No," "I can't," "I won't," and "Do it myself"). They need to separate to a degree from their parents, that is, to individuate. One way they do this is to say *no* and not to do what is asked; another is to do what is not wanted.

If adults understand children in this age range, they will create circumstances and develop attitudes that permit and promote development. Self discipline is better learned through guidance than through punishment. It's better learned through a "We are a team, I am the leader, it's my job to help you grow up" approach than through a "me against you" approach.

Creating a Positive Climate Promotes Self-Discipline

Creating a positive climate for the very young involves

- spending lots of leisurely time with an infant or child;
- sharing important activities and meaningful play;
- listening and answering as an equal, not as an instructor (for example, using labeling words when a toddler points inquiringly toward something, or discussing whatever topic the 2-year-old is trying to tell you about);
- complimenting the child's efforts: "William is feeding himself!" "Juana is putting on her shoe!" (even if what you are seeing is only clumsy stabs in the right direction); and
- smiling, touching, caressing, kissing, cuddling, holding, rocking, hugging.

Harmful, Negative Disciplinary Methods

Criticizing, discouraging, creating obstacles and barriers, blaming, shaming, using sarcastic or cruel humor, or using physical punishment are some negative disciplinary methods used with young children. Often saying, "Stop that!" "Don't do it that way!" or "You never..." is harmful to children's self-esteem. Such discipline techniques as removal from the group, or isolation in a time-out chair or a corner, may have negative consequences for the child.

Any adult might occasionally do any of these things. Doing any or all of them more than once in a while means that a negative approach to discipline has become a habit and urgently needs to be altered before the child experiences low self-esteem as a permanent part of her personality.

Good Approaches to Discipline

- increase a child's self-esteem,
- allow her to feel valued,
- encourage her to feel cooperative,
- enable her to learn gradually the many skills involved in taking some responsibility for what happens to her,
- motivate her to change her strategy rather than to blame others,
- help her to take initiative, relate successfully to others, and solve problems.

This digest was adopted from an article that appeared in the November, 1988 issue of *Young Children* (pages 24-9).

For More Information

"Ideas That Work with Young Children: Avoiding *Me Against You* Discipline." *Young Children* (November, 1988): 24-9.

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